



**Testimony on the 2007 Farm Bill
Farm Bill Forum
East Brunswick, NJ**

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I appreciate the opportunity to offer suggestions on USDA programs that will be reauthorized as part of the 2007 Farm Bill. My comments will be restricted to the three USDA programs that my organization, Mercer Street Friends Food Cooperative, participates in: the Food stamp program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. The 2002 Farm Bill included some wonderful changes which improved FSP administration and access for low-income families. The new law also made several positive changes in the quality control (QC) system which encouraged states to improved participation and achieve more effective administration. The farm bill also restored eligibility to most legal immigrants, a group that had lost eligibility under welfare legislation. We would like to see that those improvements remain in the 2007 Farm Bill and would like to recommend some additional changes to improve the administration and access of the food stamp program:

1. Eliminate the face-to-face interview requirement for recertifying households. These households were in the food stamp office only 6 months prior for the last face-to-face interview. Limiting unnecessary visits to the food stamp office will improve FS participation by eligible families. NJ is ranked 50th in the Nation for the participation of low-income working families eligible for food stamps, only 24% of eligible low-income working families apply to the food stamp program in NJ. Removing barriers to the program will improve access and increase participation.
2. States should assist the food stamp outreach efforts of nonprofits and USDA funds should be made available to support this effort. Many eligible people do not participate in the program because they do not know they are eligible. Administrative guidelines regarding food stamp outreach should encourage states to help fund food stamp outreach efforts by nonprofits in their state. Our organization received USDA Food Stamp Participation Grant funding which has allowed our organization to hire a part-time, bilingual community food stamp outreach worker. Our food stamp outreach worker conducts food stamp screening at 35 community sites: WIC Clinics, Nutrition Projects for the Elderly Centers, low-income housing sites, emergency food pantries, and social service agencies. This project has been extremely successful this past year with over 200 clients being referred to the Mercer County Food Stamp office to initiate a food stamp application. Funding for this position will be exhausted by June 2006. Our

organization would like to continue to provide this service to low-income families in our community.

3. Another feature of the food stamp program which should be altered is the base monthly food stamp benefit level. Food stamp benefit levels should be based on a food plan that accurately reflects what it costs to provide a family with a nutritionally adequate diet. The benefit formula should be revised to allow families to set aside more of their income for rent, utilities, child care and health costs, which have risen significantly since the program was established. All aspects of the benefit structure must keep pace with inflation. Currently, benefit levels are based on the Thrifty Food Plan, an estimate of what it would cost for a family of four to purchase a month's worth of food, representing a minimally adequate diet. When the plan was first developed during the Depression, the federal government described it as inadequate for long-term consumption. Studies since have shown that these initial food cost assumptions are incorrect for most low-income people.
4. Increase the minimum monthly benefit from \$10 to \$50.
5. Expand Food Stamp eligibility to all low-income households regardless of citizenship or immigration status. The number of children born to immigrants nationwide and in our state, both legal and illegal, has been steadily increasing. According to a study of birth records by the Center for Immigration Studies, 32% of births in New Jersey were from illegal or legal immigrants in 2002. A recent review by the Urban Institute, *"The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants"*, found that children of immigrants make up 22% of the population of children under six in the US and 93% of these children are US citizens (March 2002 U.S. Current Population Survey). Although they have higher rates of economic hardship, children of immigrants use public benefits less often than children of natives. Many of the parents of these children assume that since they are not eligible for the food stamp program, their children are not eligible.

Our organization also participates in The Emergency Food Assistance Program by distributing USDA commodities to emergency pantries, shelters and soup kitchens in Mercer County. This program plays an important role in responding to families' needs, particularly in emergency situations. The federal government can do more to support charitable organizations that supplement the core federal food assistance programs. Both TEFAP and CSFP are effective programs that should be expanded. TEFAP needs more funding for commodities and program administration. Moreover, federal tax law should provide additional incentives to encourage charitable food donations to food banks and pantries.

For the past four years, Mercer Street Friends has worked with the Mercer County Office on Aging conducting outreach to eligible low-income seniors for the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program in Mercer County. This program helps to improve the nutritional quality of low-income seniors' diets as well as providing financial support to

small local farmers in New Jersey. This program improves the nutritional quality of low-income seniors' diets and provides federal funding for small local family farmers. Unfortunately, this program is funded at a level that only allows 5% of the 500,000 seniors eligible for the program in our state to participate. The funding for this program should be expanded in the future Farm Bill.

I appreciate getting the chance to provide recommendations regarding improvements to USDA programs which will be part of the 2007 Farm Bill. I hope that these programs will be expanded and improved to better serve the low-income families which depend on these programs to sustain their health and their children's health. These programs provide food and nutrition to families that do not have any other financial means to prepare a meal each day for their children and themselves.

Thank-you for your attention.

MERCER STREET FRIENDS FOOD COOPERATIVE

The Mercer Street Friends Food Cooperative is a regional food bank whose mission is to alleviate hunger through food distribution, nutrition education and assistance, and advocacy.

Food Distribution

We take good wholesome food that might otherwise be wasted or discarded and channel the food to places where the hungry are fed: emergency food pantries; soup kitchens; shelters for the homeless, troubled teens, and women and children; group homes and halfway houses; child care centers; senior citizen sites; and social service agencies serving meals to the disabled. Annually, the Food Cooperative receives and distributes 1.5-million pounds of food, which reaches over 17,000 needy individuals each month. We provide food to a network of 50+ faith based and social service charities (see membership roster).

Seventy-five percent of the food comes as donations: commodities from the US Department of Agriculture; groceries from food manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers and retailers; fresh fruits and vegetables from our state's farmers; proceeds of the annual letter carrier food drive and canned and dry packaged food collected from food drives organized by schools, houses of worship, businesses, corporations, government agencies, youth groups, etc. With government and corporate grants, the Food Cooperative is able to purchase poultry and lean meats, as well as nonperishable protein-rich canned products.

Nutrition Education and Assistance

Our nutrition programs, which strive to improve the health and diets of people who receive our food, include workshops with cooking demonstrations for clients of our member agencies and training for agencies of the food bank on food safety and proper food storage, menu planning, recipes and food preparation tips. We prepare and mail a Nutrition Message of the Month (in English and Spanish) with accompanying recipes.

Advocacy

Through our advocacy efforts, we work to promote public policies that offer long-term solutions for food security. We inform, educate and encourage elected officials and policy makers to take action to safeguard and strengthen federally funded food and nutrition programs, such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Food Stamps, School Breakfast, and Summer Feeding programs that provide the safety net for vulnerable families.





Member Organizations

Abundant Life Christian Center	Morrisville Presbyterian Church
Amani House	Mount Carmel Guild
Anchor House	Mount Bethel Church
Angel's Wings	Multitudes, Inc.
ARC of Mercer County	N. Clinton Ave. Early Ed. Center
Catholic Charities	Phoebe's Pantry
Clinton House	Princeton Deliverance Center
Community Action Service Center	Rescue Mission of Trenton
Concerned Citizens of Ewing	Sacred Heart Church
Cranbury Presbyterian Church	Salvation Army
Crisis Ministry	Samaritan Baptist Church
East Trenton Center	School Age Child Care-Mercer St. Friends
Elm Court	St. Anthony of Padua
Faith Deliverance Cathedral	St. Raphael Parish
Family Preservation Center	Trenton Area Soup Kitchen
Food Pantry at Mercer St. Friends	Trenton Family Preservation House
Friends Adult Day Care	Trenton Transitional Housing
Griggs Farm	Trenton YMCA
Hamilton Ave. Early Ed. Center	Triad House
Helping Arms (Escher St. SRO)	Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
HomeFront	Union Industrial Home
Isles, Inc.	United Progress, Inc.
Lawrence Neighborhood Center	Village Charter School
Martin House	West State St. Child Development Ctr.
Mercer County HIV Consortium	John O. Wilson Neighborhood Center
Mobile Meals of Trenton	



HUNGER AND POVERTY IN OUR COMMUNITIES

- The Mercer Street Friends Food Cooperative, the region's food bank, has seen a 55% increase in the amount of requests for emergency food at member agencies in Mercer County since 2000. (Mercer Street Friends 2004).
- In Mercer County, 25% of school age children qualify for free and reduced price meals, 19% qualify for free school meals (NJ Dept of Agriculture 2004 data). A family of four must make less than \$24,505 a year to qualify for free meals during the school day.
- In October 2004, 15,260 Mercer County residents received food stamps, 50% of them children (NJ DHS data, Oct 2004). The food stamp participation rate for Mercer County is 57% based on 26,070 people in poverty for all ages, (US Census Data 2000).
- In New Jersey, over 40% of households receiving emergency food assistance, report having to choose between paying for food or paying for their utilities, rents and mortgage bills. 42% of those households include at least one employed adult. 40% of the members of those households are children under 18 years of age (*Second Harvest, Hunger in America 2001*).
- USDA survey of emergency food pantry clients indicates that 93% of households have mean monthly incomes at or below 130% of poverty. The average monthly income was \$789/month. (ERS/USDA July 2003)
- In NJ, 8.4% (703,000) of the state's population live in poverty. The number of children living in poverty has increased 17.8% and the number of families living in poverty has increased 14% from 2002 to 2003. (Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2004).
- During the past year, 85% of the surveyed cities reported that emergency food assistance facilities have had to decrease the quantity of food provided and/or number of times families or individuals can come to get food because of the lack of resources (*U.S. Conf of Mayors, 2001*).
- In New Jersey between the late 1980's and the late 1990's, the average income of the poorest fifth of families decreased by \$30 while the average income of the richest fifth of families increased by \$29,000. (*Center on Budget and Policy Priority, 2002*).
- A single parent of two young children working full-time in a minimum wage job for a year would make \$10,712 before taxes—more than \$3,918 below the poverty line (*US Census Bureau, 2001*).